

It's no secret that in a city with as rich of a history as Savannah, preservation of historical buildings is critical. Briana Paxton, a local historic preservation professional, knew this all too well and was inspired to buy, restore, and now operate the building at 2409 Waters Avenue. Currently, the building is home to The Stacks Bookstore, Cast and Grey Botanicals, and the soon-to-be Good Fortune Market.

Paxton will be speaking at an event on August 15th, hosted by the Historic Savannah Foundation (HSF) as part of their 2024 Historic Savannah Foundation Lecture Series, "The People, Places and Stories That Define Savannah." She'll be discussing the revitalization of Waters Avenue and her building in particular. I caught up with her to discuss her background and what she envisions for the future of Waters.

Paxton moved to the Baldwin Park area back in 2018 and was immediately drawn to Waters. Beyond her background in preservation, she worked with a consulting firm called Place Economics which studied the economic impact of preservation. "That background has kind of led me to just seeing so much potential on Waters—there are so many bones here, like, why are these buildings vacant, and why is not much happening?"

Paxton then explained her and a fellow preservationist friend's idea of a "vacancy vortex": "This cycle of just like, oh, there's a broken window. So this must be a bad place. So we shouldn't invest here. We shouldn't walk here and just, you know, kind of social cues, I guess, that people get, and it means that this place sits there and decays."

"What has really caught my eye about Waters is there is so much history there and recent history that people really have fond memories of Waters Avenue." Paxton discussed visitors recalling stores and clubs they used to visit on the street, along with the African American Jazz club that used to inhabit her building. "I think those memories are really important to capture and to vocalize, and I don't think that history has really been told on Waters Avenue, so I am excited to share more of that."

She then talked about her experience traveling with her consulting firm and witnessing locals who had redeveloped property for the good of their neighborhoods. "They just knew or had a sense of what the community needed, and they were going to put those assets in buildings like in their neighborhood. So I'm very hyper-local development strategy where I live in Baldwin Park, and I'm investing and kind of doing whatever I think needs to be done."

We talked next about Paxton's building and what the process looked like from when she got it until now. She recalled how she cold-called the previous owner and was able to convince him to sell, how she and her restoration partners were able to use city incentive programs to fund much of the process, and how intensely the building needed a little TLC. She joked, "It became clear that we needed to replace the back wall because it was water-damaged as tall as I am."

She went on to talk about the tenets of her building and the value that each store brings to Waters, especially with The Stacks being one of the only accessible bookstores in town. Paxton

also made a point to say that she and all three tenants live within walking distance of the building. "I think everybody involved with this building was excited to invest in it because we all live very close, and wanted to make it something that we all want to visit."

I asked her if she had any sort of idea as to what tenants she wanted when the restoration process began, and she explained that it was a question for the team as well. They went back and forth with the idea of leasing out the entire building to just one tenant, before settling on having three. "I'll take the pain of having three leases and dealing with that because I thought it was, you know, what the neighborhood needed in the long run."

Paxton went on to explain what she wanted out of the building. "Previously, there was a shoe shop, there was a barber shop, bakery, a beverage shop, a beauty shop, like all sorts of just neighborhood retail, convenience type businesses were in there. So I think, being a preservationist, that was kind of the life I wanted to bring. Kind of like neighborhood businesses that people are going to want to walk to and grab something or walk to and—some sort of service that people need pretty frequently."

We went more into detail about the history of her building as well. "The heyday of my building is definitely when Mr. Robert Greene owned it, 1973 to 1994 because he had the Carousel Lounge in there. There's not a ton written about it, and I actually am still searching for photos of it. So if you can put out a plea, if the people that read your article and happen to have family photos of the Carousel Lounge, we want them."

"I'm still just so curious." She continued. "Like, what did it look like? What was the layout like? What did their sign look like on the outside? Those are the African American stories that I think everyone's frustrated are disappearing in Savannah. I think that's why I'm so glad my tenants are also on this train of like, yeah, let's tell the history of this building and give agency and voice to those families that were the entrepreneurs in the decades prior because there'll be a new chapter of landlords and entrepreneurs in this space at some point. So we're just trying to honor that history a bit."

I asked Paxton if she and her team had their eyes on any other buildings on Waters or if they had a plan moving forward to continue the revitalization, and she explained that she and Clinton Edminster, the owners of Waters Cafe, have been hosting bi-monthly meetings of the Waters Avenue Business Association. "We've literally just been trying to, like, get people in the same room. I want people to know each other and be able to associate names with a face, with a business with a building, and just start networking and getting people more comfortable with each other."

She went on to explain the range of businesses and people that show up to the meetings and how a huge priority is engaging with the neighborhood associations nearby, like Baldwin Park and the Benjamin van Clark neighborhood. Some neighborhoods have been harder to reach, and Paxton conceded that it might be from a place of skepticism about her intentions, which she said is why she's so focused on connecting the community. "When things do come down the

line, we already know each other. We already trust each other. So, yeah, I'm really focusing right now on human capital."

"I think the other big thing that I would love to see happen on Waters," she said. "Is just empowering the people that do own property on Waters to do something with it." Paxton went on to discuss the amount of vacant properties that sit on Waters for one reason or another. "I think we as a business association, or whatever we're going to call ourselves, need to help set the tone a little bit and be able to have those tough conversations. It's not fair to the rest of us that you just need the property—either fix it up, rent it out, or sell it, you know, give it to somebody who will do something with it, right?"

"I think revitalization of waters—I definitely want to be involved. I'm not the type of person that needs to be in charge, but I like to know how my work contributes. So right now, I'm just trying to push these meetings, get people in a room. Really, just trying to build a lot of rapport and understanding with people."

With the history that the city has, it's incredibly important to shine a spotlight on it and preserve it. The way that Briana Paxton is doing it, by making that history a special thing for locals rather than tourists, makes that history magical.

Paxton's lecture is on August 15th, 321 East York Street, at 6 pm. Reservations are recommended, as space is limited. Attendance is free for Historic Savannah Foundation members and \$15 for non-members. Members and non-members may RSVP by emailing Kendall Graham at kgraham@myhsf.org or calling 912-233-7787, ext. 109. To learn more about her building and her tenets, visit their Instagram pages: [@thestacks_bookstore](#); [@castandgreybotanical](#); [@goodfortunesav](#).